
BERKELEY'S CASE FOR IDEALISM (*Part 1 of 2*)

Text source:

*A Treatise Concerning the Principles of
Human Knowledge*, sectns. 1-21, 34-48

BERKELEY'S REJECTION OF MATERIALISM

- Berkeley rejects the view that there exists a mind-independent material world, a world outside the realm of ideas in the mind. He thinks that this mind-independent material world is a philosopher's fiction.
 - We have no good reason to think that it exists, and in fact we can prove that it cannot exist, and even that we cannot even intelligibly talk of such a world. Really the whole hypothesis is just verbiage, unintelligible gobbledygook.
 - Moreover, this doctrine of a material world belief is responsible for all the great philosophical confusions, including skepticism and atheism.
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BERKELEY'S ALTERNATIVE THEORY: 'IDEALISM'

- According to Berkeley all that exists in the world are spirits (also known as minds) and their ideas, where these ideas are nothing more the various mental states of those spirits.
 - There are two sorts of mind: created minds like ours, and the one uncreated mind, God.
 - God has the special ability to create vivid ideas in the minds of other spirits (these are our *perceptions*); the rest of us spirits only have a limited ability to create certain thinned-out ideas in our own minds (these are our *imaginings*, and of course are ultimately constructed from copies of perceptions).
 - So (Berkeley says) there is nothing in the world beyond minds and their ideas, *but there is a real world, which consists of the ideas that we receive from God (perceive)* and do not create ourselves.
 - **The real world is not up to us and is independent of us. It is caused by and depends on God**
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ARGUMENT (1): ALL THE THINGS WE ACTUALLY PERCEIVE ARE IDEAS

“The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it ...”

“It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing among men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding. But with how great an assurance and acquiescence soever this principle may be maintained in the world; yet whoever shall find it in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, perceive it to contain a manifest contradiction. For what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations; and is it not plainly repugnant [i.e., contradictory] that any one of them should exist unperceived?”

(Principles, sections 3-4)

ARGUMENT (2): THE HYPOTHESIS OF THE MATERIAL WORLD IS EXPLANATORILY REDUNDANT. *OCKHAM'S RAZOR BECKONS!*

“But ... perhaps it may be thought easier to conceive and explain [the nature of our perceptions] by supposing external bodies in their likeness rather than otherwise; and so it might at least be probable there are such things as bodies that excite their idea in our minds. But neither can this be said; for though we give the materialists their external bodies, they by their own confession are never the nearer knowing how our ideas are produced: since they own themselves unable to comprehend in what manner body can act upon spirit, or how it is possible it should imprint an idea in the mind. ... If therefore it be possible for bodies to exist without the mind, yet to hold they do so, must needs be a very precarious opinion; since it is to suppose, without any reason at all, that God has created innumerable beings that are entirely useless, and serve no manner of purpose.”

(Principles, sec. 19)

ARGUMENT (3): PQs CAN'T EXIST WITHOUT SQs, AND SO CAN EXIST ONLY IN THE MIND

“They who assert that figure, motion, and the rest of the primary or original qualities do exist without the mind, in unthinking substances, do at the same time acknowledge that colours, sounds, heat, cold, and such like secondary qualities, do not, which they tell us, are sensations existing in the mind alone, that depend upon and are occasioned by the different size, texture, and motion of the minute particles of matter. ... Now if it be certain, that those original qualities are inseparably united with the other sensible qualities, and not, even in thought, capable of being abstracted from them, it plainly follows that they exist only in the mind. But I desire anyone to reflect and try, whether he can by any abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body, without all other sensible qualities. For my own part I see evidently that it is not in my power to frame and idea a body extended and moved, but I must withal give it some colour or other sensible quality which is acknowledged to exist only in the mind.”

(Principles, section 10)

(4) THE NO-RESEMBLANCE ARGUMENT

■ The target view: Lockean Representative Realism

- Lockeans agree that we are only *directly* acquainted with ideas in our minds.
 - But (they claim) these ideas are caused by and represent external material objects.
 - Our ideas are capable of representing these external objects because they resemble them in certain respects (at least with the PQs if not the SQs). If it weren't for these resemblances, our ideas couldn't stand for these mind-independent realities.
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(4) THE NO-RESEMBLANCE ARGUMENT (*continued*)

- “But, say you, though ideas do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but another idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure. ... I ask whether those supposed originals or external things, of which our ideas are the pictures or representations, be themselves perceivable or no? If they are, then they are ideas, and we have gained our point; but if you say they are not, I appeal to any one whether it be sense, to assert that a colour is like something which is invisible; hard or soft, like something which is intangible; and so of the rest”

(*Principles* section 8)

- We can only *think about* something by using our ideas; but if none of our ideas can ever *resemble* external material objects, then we cannot even *think about* them, nor even understand the thought that there should be such things.
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